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The Mahdiyya Movement in Sudan

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In Sudanese history, the Mahdiyya (from Mahdi, "guided one," in Arabic) refers to a revolutionary movement that overthrew the Ottoman- Egyptian regime in the early 1880s and established a government in Sudan that lasted until 1898. The Ottoman province of Egypt, which had gained increasing autonomy under the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805–1848), had conquered Sudan in 1820–1822. Muhammad Ali and his successors sought the country's supposedly abundant mineral and human resources to finance Egyptian modernizing projects, help create a new army, and develop both agricultural and industrial enterprises.

After six decades of foreign rule, large sections of the Sudanese population were restive for various reasons. First, they disliked the government's growing reliance on European Christians such as Samuel Baker, governor (1869–1873) of Equatoria (an Upper White Nile region that would henceforth become the most southern province of Sudan), and Charles George Gordon, governor (1874–1876) of Equatoria and governor-general (1877–1880) of Sudan. These British officers were appointed by the Egyptian khedive Ismail Pasha (1863–1879) to spread Ottoman-Egyptian control over the upper reaches of the White Nile and fight against the slave trade. Second, heavy taxation resulted in famine, depopulation, and migration, whereas the growth of cities such as Khartoum and El Obeid posed an economic challenge to the older urban centers of Sennar, Wad Medani, and Shendi. Third, many Sudanese—above all merchants from the Danaqla and Jaliyyin tribes who had moved to the province of Kordofan because of fiscal pressure and riverine farmers of the Nile Valley relying on slave labor—opposed governmental efforts to suppress the lucrative slave trade. Finally, Sufi leaders resented the presence of Azharite ulemas (al-Azhar was and remains the world's leading center of Sunni Islamic learning) in Sudan's judicial and educational institutions, which challenged their own authority. Adhering to Sufi orders such as the Sammaniyya, the Khatmiyya, the Ismailiyya, and the Majdhubiyya, the Sudanese population felt alienated by the more doctrinaire Islam preached by Egyptian ulemas.

Hence, when Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdallah (born on August 12, 1844, in the Dongola district and died on June 22, 1885, in Omdurman) publicly proclaimed himself the Mahdi on June 29, 1881, at Aba Island (White Nile), large numbers of Sudanese joined his cause and prepared to fight against the Ottoman-Egyptian government. According to Sunni doctrine, which largely prevails in Sudan, the Mahdi should appear at the end of time to restore true religion and spread social justice throughout the world. Muhammad Ahmad's reputation as a Sufi sheikh of the Sammaniyya order as well as widespread expectations of the Mahdi linked to the approaching Islamic year 1300 (1882–1883 CE) contributed to popularizing the Mahdiyya among the Sudanese. In less than four years the movement managed to take control of nearly the whole of Sudan, occupying the capital of Khartoum on January 25, 1885. In these same critical

> **HOW DID MUHAMMAD AHMAD LEGITIMIZE HIS AUTHORITY?** Muhammad Ahmad claimed to be the successor of Prophet Muhammad on the basis of a prophetic vision. While Ahmad's reputation as a sheikh of the Sammaniyya order certainly helped him gain disciples, the central strategy he used to legitimize his authority was the modeling of his movement on the historical heritage of the Prophet and the first caliphs. Like the Prophet, Ahmad sought to establish a unified community and required his disciples to swear an oath of allegiance (*baya*). Naming them Ansar in

reference to the Prophet's first followers in Medina, he migrated to Jabal Qadir (November 1881), reenacting the Prophet's flight from Mecca to Medina (*hijra*). Ahmad appointed three *khalifa* among his close supporters, who were to represent the successors of the first caliphs of Islam. His successor as ruler of the Mahdiyya, Abdullahi al-Taishi, was thus associated with Abu Bakr, believed by Sunnis to be the first caliph. The Mahdi's actual numerous military victories against governmental troops were perceived as further evidence of his mission's validity. —*Iris Seri-Hersch*

years, Ottoman Egypt was shaken by the Urabi protonationalist revolt (September 1881), subsequent British occupation (September 1882), and the loss of Sudan (January 1885). The Mahdiyya's territorial expansion was accompanied by the establishment of various administrative, military, and judicial institutions. Several governors were selected by the Mahdi to manage the provinces of the emerging Mahdist state. The army was divided into three commands, a treasury was constituted, and a chief judge (*qadi al-Islam*) was appointed. After the fall of Khartoum (January 25, 1885), the Mahdist capital was founded at Omdurman, just across the White Nile. Muhammad Ahmad centralized all decision-making powers in his hands. He banned the existing Sufi orders, condemning them as divisive and useless once the encompassing rule of the Mahdiyya had been established. He also abolished the traditional Islamic schools of thought (*madhahib*), recognizing three exclusive sources for Mahdist law: the Sunna, the Quran, and prophetic inspiration (*ilham*). Independent judgment (*ijtihad*) became his exclusive right. New laws included the prohibition of pilgrimages to tombs of saints; the banning of alcohol, tobacco, and music; and the confining of women to the private sphere.

The Mahdi died on June 22, 1885, only five months after the collapse of the Ottoman-Egyptian regime. His successor, Abdullahi al-Taishi (1846–1899), completed the transformation of the Mahdiyya into a state structure. His 13-year-long rule (1885–1898) was characterized by mounting internal and external challenges. The Ashraf opposition (relatives and supporters of the Mahdi belonging mostly to Danaqla and Jaliyyin tribes), which did not recognize him as the legitimate successor of the Mahdi, organized two great rebellions against the regime (in 1885–1886 and 1891). Fearing for his personal and political survival, Abdullahi became increasingly autocratic. He forced fellow Taishi nomads to emigrate from western Sudan and resettle in Omdurman so as to strengthen his power base. With regard to foreign affairs, he attempted to continue expanding the Mahdiyya eastward and northward. Border warfare brought Sudan into conflict with Ethiopia for a few years (1885–1889), until the Ethiopian emperor Yohannes IV was killed at the Battle of al-Qallabat (March 9–10, 1889). Although Mahdist jihad primarily targeted British-occupied Egypt, physical and political obstacles prevented any attack until the summer of 1889. Sudanese forces were then overwhelmed by Anglo-Egyptian troops at the Battle of Tushki (August 3, 1889), which definitively crushed Mahdist territorial ambitions toward Egypt. In the 1890s, European progression into the Nile Valley, the Red Sea, and central Africa significantly pressured Sudan. While the British fought the Mahdist forces from Egypt (mainly from Suakin), the Italians advanced westward from their Eritrean colony. In the south, Belgian expeditions sent from the Congo Free State threatened the Upper Nile and Bahr al-Ghazal Sudanese provinces. After two years of southward progression along the Nile, Anglo-Egyptian armies eventually overthrew the Mahdist state in the Battle of Karari (September 2, 1898). The Condominium Agreement (January 19, 1899) formally established joint

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Anglo-Egyptian rule over Sudan until the country gained independence on January 1, 1956.

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